

EDITORIAL

This issue is devoted to Martin Kottmeyer's presentation of yet more evidence showing how cultural influences, particularly science fiction films, affect the descriptions given by UFO witnesses. Kottmeyer and others who use the psychosocial hypothesis constantly produce evidence to support their ideas, whereas the ETH proponents can produce only cranky ideas about magnetic, anti-gravity or interdimensional saucers, accompanied by a constant whingeing about 'sceptics' and 'debunkers' (not to mention 'armchair ufologists' and 'pelicanists').

SHOULD SAUCERS SPIN?

Martin Kottmeyer

Many do. Most do not. There is no consistency in the matter. Some whirl madly. Some rotate slowly. Seen from below, they rotate counter-clockwise more often than clockwise, but not universally. (1) Some manage to spin both ways at once; the outer rim goes one way while the centre section turns the opposite way. (2) Sometimes the rim spins and the centre stays still, but there is also a case where the centre spun with the rim staying still. (3)

The inconsistency has bothered nobody, but it seems like it should. The natural assumption concerning the spinning of saucers is that it would be necessary for their propulsion. Yet most saucer reports don't show evidence of spinning. A non-spinning saucer would probably be more useful. It is hard to imagine anybody functioning very well in a spinning saucer. The prospect of aliens emerging from a saucer disoriented and puking their guts out veers into the area of slapstick and visceral disbelief. Yet if saucers can propel themselves and function without spinning, why should any of them spin? What purpose is served in those that do spin?

The idea that saucers spin did not originate directly from the Kenneth Arnold report. Arnold's report shows a bilaterally symmetrical craft that travels in the direction of the axis of symmetry. He mentions nothing about them spinning. The news stories about his sighting erred in calling the objects saucers, but did not compound it with any talk about spinning. They travelled very fast, waved in and out of formation, and were on a course between Mount Rainier and Mount Adams. This last suggested a horizontal trajectory.

Despite this, reports of spinning saucers turn up immediately and repeatedly in the reports of the 1947 Wave. There are at least 37 cases of people describing spinning, whirling, or twirling saucers among the 853 reports collected by Ted Bloecher. (4) There is good reason to believe that there was probably no imitation involved in this. They seem randomly distributed across the nation and are all minor cases with local news dissemination. Percentage-wise we are dealing with 4% of the reports. It is easy to guess why they arose. It seems an elementary elaboration inherent in our conception of the behaviour of round objects such as saucers and discs. When a person flings a plate or saucer into the air, you usually give it a spin so it travels farther. Round objects often possess the property of spinning: wheels spin, records spin, balls spin. It seems a natural generalisation and probably an inevitability in a population of UFO reports.

The paradox that spinning brings to saucers as intelligently piloted craft only emerges on conscious reflection. It took about two and a half years before a report turned up that resolved this paradox by having a craft that has the pilot in a stationary centre cabin while the outer rim moves. On 15 March 1950 Dr Craig Hunter, near Pentfield, Pennsylvania, has a close encounter with a 'radical

new warplane'. Though it has a slowly spinning ring visible on the underside, the centre cabin and outer edge are stationary. Critics noted the drawing was suspiciously similar to a drawing in a speculative article on saucer propulsion by Commander Robert B. McLaughlin for *True*. Hunter denied seeing the *True* article and this need not be untrue. (5) From the vantage of decades later, one can, however, say the two creations share the look of their era. Craft identical to Hunter's and McLaughlin's simply don't appear today. The idea of the stationary cabin, however, made good sense and is a property of UFOs that recurrently turns up afterwards on UFOs of different styles.

A flashier elaboration on the idea of spinning saucers combined the spinning with a common presumption of the era that jets or rockets propelled saucers. In this variant the jets generate the spinning with exhaust flames swirling out of the rim of the craft like a pinwheel. This form did not appear during the 1947 Wave. There were at least two dozen cases of saucers with jet or rocket flames in that wave, but they were associated with straight-line flight and never when the property of spinning was mentioned. The earliest report of a pinwheel saucer came out of Russia some time in 1949. We only know of it because someone dug it out of the Blue Book files. A German POW told US military intelligence of his being in Dnepropetrovsk SSR and seeing large disc-shaped missiles that were black in the centre but glowed red to white hot as one goes out along the radius. Out of the rim came sparks. (6) The idea of jet-propelled rims does not become popular until 1952 and wide dissemination of news of the crash of a Soviet-made saucer on Spitzbergen. In the 28 June account, it was revealed the craft had a stationary cabin and a rotating rim having 46 jets on it. This craft was felt to be Russian since the chronometers and interior instrumentation had Russian symbols on them. On 9 July 1952 the Oscar Linke report of an encounter near Germany's Russian Zone emerges. The refugee mayor saw figures in parkas rush to a saucer that took off vertically. 'From the swirling effect of the glowing exhaust I got the impression the whole thing was spinning like a top.' (7) On 26 August 1952 Herbert Long and two girls from Kutztown, Pennsylvania also report seeing a large saucer that swished skyward at a tremendous speed. There is a drawing by an artist displaying the pinwheeling effect. (8) Three days later, 29 August, comes the once strongly touted Villacoublay case involving military personnel who described a violet disc from which irregular trails spurted out that twisted like a whiplash. (9) The next year, blueprints appeared in *The Aeroplane* for a saucer with a stationary cabin and 4 jets pinwheeling along the edge. (10) Jacques Vallée would showcase other pinwheeling UFO cases in his early writings, notably the Marignane story of 27 October 1952 and the Frederick Moreland case of 13 July 1959. (11)

One case I find particularly interesting from a psychosocial perspective wasn't investigated until 1982, but originally took place in October 1963 at Millersport, Ohio. It is a multiple-witness case and several drawings were made by the people involved. Glenna Parkinson's drawing imperfectly, but unmistakably, resembles Herbert Long's saucer by having rim flames, a broad bell-jar dome, and a broad antenna. The other three witnesses provide substantially different drawings. Most notably, none of the others drew pinwheeling flames. Here the elaborative effect of cultural set on perception is nakedly demonstrated. (12)

Pinwheeling saucers constituted at most a minor strand in the UFO mythos and have pretty much vanished with the diminishing credibility of the secret weapons theory. Rocket and jet propulsion as a means of moving saucers is thoroughly out of fashion. The parallel or competing tradition of saucers propelled by magnetic drives was more evocative of alien forces and has showed staying power due to the cultural success of the ETH. (13) The Spitzbergen and Linke cases probably bear the most responsibility for the recurrent character of pinwheeling saucers due to their wide publicity. Though Linke is largely forgotten these days, his report not only appeared nationally in the newspapers but also was included in the first UFO documentary, a short film by Telenews titled *The Flying Saucer Mystery*.

Linke was pretty clearly responsible for another strand of the UFO mythos. When it begins to take off the rim starts to move upward before the stationary cabin and the craft takes on a mushroom configuration. This very odd innovation may have been inspired by the nuclear imagery of the era, i.e. the mushroom clouds created by atomic bombs. There seems little doubt it served as the inspiration for the madly spinning Ray Harryhausen saucers of *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* (1956). The pinwheeling flames are absent. This is an alien saucer and the propulsion has to be magnetic to make their defeat by the scientists in the film possible. The mushroom launch configuration is prominent in several key scenes. It is visually startling, but ingenious in conception. The stationary stalk allows humans and entities to enter the saucer while, so to speak, keeping the motor running. The pilots don't have to waste time slowing the saucer down and then speeding it up again. The rapid take-off capability is a definite plus for a craft that must do battle at the climax. The spinning in flight and

gyrational instability they show when attacked gives them a very animated appearance and is visually giddy.

This mushroom configuration has recurred in a string of cases: Pajasblancas Airport, Argentina - 1 May 1957; (14) Rio Pardo, Brazil - June 1959; San Casciana, Italy - 10 April 1962; the Mount Etna contact of 30 April 1962 by famed Italian contactee Eugenio Siragusa; Chanaral, Chile - 19 July 1965; (15) Erie, Presque-Ile Park, Pennsylvania CE3K - 31 July 1966; (16) a series of Brazilian cases near Belo Horizonte and La Baleia in August and September 1967; (17) Boyup Brook, Australia - 30 October 1967. (18) In a Linstead, Maryland case three witnesses saw and many more heard a mushroom-shaped craft that had snow swirling under it. (19) As recently as December 1990 Robert Simpson, walking on a beach in India, saw a 'a spaceship of some origin' hanging in the sky with a generally similar mushroom configuration. (20) Though ufologists are intrigued that people in such diverse locales report such similar craft, I am more impressed with the fact that these cases lack the pinwheeling flames of the original Linke case. The international distribution of the 1956 Harryhausen film seems to be the proper deduction of this spread of mushroom saucers.

I must deal here with a claim by Larry Robinson. In 'Behind the UFO Scenes' he writes: 'Disk shaped UFOs were not generally reported to spin until after the movie *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* showed spinning disks. Before that, most disks flew with propulsion from exhaust ports located on the back of the disk, and vertical fins, as seen in *The Thing*.' He parenthetically adds: 'Of course, this was about the time advertising planes made their debut, with the spinning saucer illusion at a distance.' It has already been demonstrated here that there was a fair number of spinning saucer cases already in 1947 and some in subsequent years were rather prominently reported. Told of this he elaborates: 'My observation was that rotating saucers were a minority before the movie was released, but afterwards they were the majority. I have *The UFO Evidence* which contains some rotating saucer reports from the 1947 wave but they were in the minority then.' (21) To my knowledge, spinning never reached a level in any period where it could be called a majority as claimed by Robinson. As a brief test, I spent an hour looking through Hall's *The UFO Evidence* and found only one case post-film with rotation (p. 32: 10/7/62) and 4 pre-film (8/7/47, 22/7/52, 19/9/52, 29/12/52) with rotation or spinning. Most of the hundred or so I looked at give no relevant details and a few dozen were post-film. So the percentages of spinning saucer cases in both periods are in single-digit territory and not even close to a majority.

A fin much like that in *The Thing* appears in a 20 March 1950 case (case X in the collection of 12 drawings used in Battelle's Special Study No. 14). (22) But *The Thing* opened in April 1951. None of the other cases in that study had fins. Two had rear exhaust and one had jets on the side with exhaust directed backwards. 'Most' had neither fins nor exhaust. Case VII (6 June 1952) displayed spinning.

It must also be said that spinning saucers made their debut in cinema in the *Flash Gordon* serial in 1938. One sequence of a madly spinning saucer appears in the *Bruce Gentry* serial of 1949 and this effects clip is recycled into the *Atom Man vs. Superman* (1950) and *Blackhawk* (1952) serials. The *Devil Girl from Mars*'s top-like spacecraft with a rim that whirls and whines like a jet turbine also beats Harryhausen's whirligigs to the screen by a year. Though some effect on the percentages of spinning saucers by Harryhausen's imagery is plausible, it has not been demonstrated and the effect would be less than turning a rarity into a majority.

The variety of cinematic saucer kinematics has its own fascinations. The flying craft of *The Mysterians* (1957) do not spin, but their Earth base is shaped like a bell jar with a rim that spins massively up and down through the ground. In *Warning from Space* (1956/1963) a saucer lifting up on vertical flames creates a strong whirlpool around it even though the craft itself is not spinning. In *Battle of the Worlds* (1963) the saucers are unmanned and spin very rapidly. The saucer craft in *Lost in Space* and *The Invaders* have lights that sequentially suggest spinning, but the craft do not actually spin. *Gamera the Invincible* (1966) is a gigantic spinning turtle that pinwheels flame out of its leg-holes. *Zontar* (1968) shows us a saucer with a slower spin rate. When we get to *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) the rotations are so slow they barely rate the word spin anymore. The craft in the finale of *Starman* (1984) has a rim that slowly revolves. The saucer masquerading as a restaurant in *Doin' Time on Planet Earth* (1988) gets up a spin-rate comically large enough to put its restaurant identity in doubt, but never reaches gyration rates like those in the fifties. Modern saucers live a more sedate life than they had back then. (23) As a group, non-spinning saucers outnumber spinning saucers by a ratio of at least 2 to 1. Viewed from underneath, the saucers from cinema prefer counter-clockwise rotation, but not universally. I did not find any instance of counter-rotation in my set of videos, though whether this is because there aren't any or my collection is less than complete I can't say. Such kinematic mirroring as does exist, I suspect, is a working out of psychological biases shared

by film-makers, UFO reporters, and humans generally more than imitation. The recurrent character of pinwheeling and mushroom saucers was a different matter since their somewhat higher conceptual complexity and their distribution over time seems to point to imitation.

Should saucers spin? There's no reason they should not if many or all are in some sense products of human imagination. The puking alien or the technical challenge of marrying immobile cabin to spinning body is rendered irrelevant. How might ETH defenders patch over this difficulty? Take one. The spinning saucers are instrumental craft that are unmanned. But what can be done with a spinning instrumental device? Spy devices would favour a stable platform. Atmospheric sampling can be done more simply by toy-sized planes, rockets, balloons, etc. Take two. We've always granted a certain percentage of UFO cases are IFOs. All rational ufologists reject Spitzbergen as a hoax. Maybe these are all just IFOs - we still have our classics and none of them spin, do they? But do the spinning cases really seem any less evidential than the non-spinning ones? Linke's report involved multiple witnesses and alleged physical traces, and would rate better than many classics were it not for the fact that it supports the Russian secret weapon theory that ufologists have rejected. (24) Villacoublay involved military people. Vallée showcased examples in *Challenge to Science*. Supporting evidence offered by Coral Lorenzen for the validity of the Trindade photographs includes a report of the identically sounding greenish-glowing enringed spheroid being over the same island a few days before it was photographed. It includes the detail: 'The ring appeared to be rotating at high speed.' (25) I don't know of any photographic case more defended than this one and it is surely a classic. This strategy thus has problems. Take three. Aliens are weird and . . . Cut. We know the government tries to make the UFO phenomenon look ridiculous . . . CUT.

It's enough to make a ufologist's head spin.

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